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Papers on Language, Gender, and Power

Robin Tolmach Lakoff

Edited by Laurel A. Sutton

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Not in our stars, but in ourselves

Introduction to "You say what you are:
Acceptability and gender-related language"

BY MARY BUCHOLTZ

I first encountered the work of Robin Lakoff as a high-school student wandering the stacks of the Tulsa Public Library. I was one of those nerdy kids who read the dictionary and prescriptive usage manuals for fun, and I had already worked my way through most of the popular volumes on language that the English-language reference section had to offer. But thanks to the Dewey decimal system, linguistics was literally just around the corner. I remember the feeling of discovery that came over me as I gazed upon the shelves and realized how much was still ahead to read and learn. I went home that day with two linguistics volumes in my backpack: Chomsky's (1965) *Aspects of the theory of syntax* and Lakoff's (1975) *Language and woman's place*—two books separated by a mere decade in time, but by an unbridgeable chasm in their understanding of what language is. *Aspects* languished for the next two weeks on my bedside table after I repeatedly failed to get past the first page (in fact, it wasn't until I was assigned the book in one of Robin's graduate seminars that I finally managed to read the whole thing), but I devoured *Language and woman's place* in an hour of eager reading.

When I eventually rediscovered linguistics as an undergraduate classics major and a passionate feminist, I knew I had to study with Robin Lakoff

at the University of California, Berkeley. As Robin's graduate student, I gathered up as many of her wide-ranging publications as I could find in Berkeley's campus libraries and local bookstores and pored over them. I was repeatedly struck by the connections between the feminist insights of her work and the theories I was encountering in my gender studies courses. Yet somehow I managed to overlook one of Robin's most theoretically important pieces, from the standpoint both of feminism and of linguistics: "You say what you are: Acceptability and gender-related language."

"You say what you are" is Lakoff at her best: acutely intelligent, passionately political, avowedly iconoclastic, quotably articulate, and delightfully wry. The piece opens with Lakoff calling into question the established Chomskyan linguistic binary between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. Although readers not steeped in the history of generative grammar may be baffled by the technical language of the first few pages, Lakoff's welcome clarity as a writer—a quality as rare among linguists then as it is now—is a trustworthy guide through the key points of this arcane theory. She argues against the all-or-nothing notion of linguistic grammaticality, whereby decontextualized sentences deemed ungrammatical are marked with an asterisk (or "starred"). Lakoff instead advocates the more flexible, gradient, and context-centered notion of acceptability, noting that even the most seemingly straightforward linguistic facts cannot be judged on linguistic grounds alone but only by appeal to such supposedly extralinguistic factors as psychology and sociology.

This discussion lays the background for the heart of the chapter: Lakoff's examination of "when a judgment of acceptability ceases to be a linguistic judgment and becomes a political statement" (p. 89). She addresses this issue with particular reference to her famous characterization of "women's language." Here the chapter becomes an invaluable sequel of sorts to the far more widely read (and widely misunderstood) *Language and woman's place*, revealing both continuities and changes in Lakoff's thinking about the relationship between language and gender. Lakoff introduces several additional features of "women's language" in this chapter, including silence and hesitation markers, low volume, and pitch variation, and usefully elaborates on some previously discussed features. Equally valuably, she offers a three-way classification of the features of "women's language": (1) non-directness, (2) emotional expressiveness, and (3) conservatism. Each of these characteristics stands in contrast to what she terms "neutral language," which has traditionally been more available to men than to women. Noting that "linguistic deviation from the norm is but one form of social deviation from the norm" (p. 94), she raises the important question: Whose norms? And if a woman adheres to the norms of "women's

language," is her linguistic behavior acceptable, based on her gender, or deviant, based on the male-oriented norm? The fundamental problem, Lakoff concludes, is not the issue of acceptability itself (or even grammaticality, which she brilliantly designates a special case of acceptability uninformed by contextual factors). Rather, it is a question of who has the right to determine the acceptability of another's speech and what larger political consequences might result from any such determination.

For feminist linguists, Lakoff's chapter is an important step in the ongoing development of her thinking about gender and language. Whereas *Language and woman's place* focused primarily on the ways that "women's language" disadvantages women, in the present chapter Lakoff notes the ways in which women's ways of speaking may in fact be superior to men's, and she remains agnostic regarding whether it is best for women to emulate the speech of men, for both women and men to arrive at a gender-neutral norm, or for the genders to maintain separate speech styles.

In the decades since Lakoff wrote this chapter, feminist linguistics has shifted its focus from "woman's place" to "gender positioning," from "gender styles" to "styles of gender," from "acceptability" to "ideology." Yet changes in academic fashion do not diminish the continuing importance of Lakoff's early work on gender, in this chapter and elsewhere. For Lakoff, as a feminist linguist in the male-dominated domain of theoretical syntax, the issues she examines in this chapter were not simply academic questions but deeply personal concerns. A generation later, I have continued to confront the same agonizing questions myself, and I am reminded of the ongoing personal and political relevance of Lakoff's contributions as I introduce her ideas to my own students year after year. Like all of Lakoff's work, this chapter is deeply embedded in the time and place of its writing, but it is also timeless in the questions it asks, in the problems it confronts, and in its very human and humane engagement with the complexity of gender and language.

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